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ABSTRACT

Individuals who are stigmatized are people for whom others hold negative beliefs. In these three 1989 studies members of a stigmatized group were 7th- and 8th-grade adolescents, aged 14 and 15 years old, from a large urban midwestern African-American population. In the first study the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale was administered to 196 African-Americans. Scores for this sample were significantly higher than the norms for the total self-concept score and for all six self-concept subscales. In the second study the Nowicki-Strickland Scale, a measure of internal-external locus of control was administered to 110 adolescent African-Americans. The results indicated that the African-American youngsters in this sample were more external in their beliefs about events which control their lives than the 1973 comparison group of Nowicki and Strickland. In the third study the Attributional Style Questionnaire was used to examine the use of externalization as a self-protective mechanism. The results showed that attributional style in response to positive events is significantly different than for styles in response to negative events. The three studies indicated that the global self-concept of these youngsters was significantly higher than reported norms; that they were more external in their beliefs about events which control their lives than reported norms; and that they view themselves as having more influence over positive life events than over negative life events. (ABL)

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Three Studies Supporting Self-Protective Mechanisms In Stigmatized Minority Adolescents[1]

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Three Studies Supporting Self-Protective Mechanisms In Stigmatized Minority Adolescents

Abstract. These three studies lend empirical support to the theoretical position of Crocker and Major (1989) on the self-protective mechanisms used by a stigmatized minority. The studies show (a) global self concept of African-American youngsters to be significantly higher than reported norms, (b) beliefs about events which control their lives to be more external than reported norms, and (c) beliefs that their influence over positive life events is greater than their influence over negative life events.

The recent review of social stigma and self-esteem by Crocker and Major (1989) pointed out that "although several psychological theories predict that members of stigmatized groups should have low global self-esteem, empirical research typically does not support this prediction" (p. 608). They argued that this discrepancy could be explained by a number of different ways individuals in such groups use self-protective mechanisms to protect self-esteem.

Individuals who are stigmatized (due to ethnic minority, race, gender, physical disability, etc.), such as members of oppressed social categories, are people for whom others hold negative beliefs or stereotypes. Crocker and Major (1989) noted that, due to discrimination, they may receive "disproportionately poor interpersonal or economic outcomes" (p. 609).

In the three studies reported below, members of a stigmatized group were seventh and eighth grade (14 and 15 years old) adolescents from a large urban midwestern African-American population. Gender was represented in approximately equal proportions. In addition, these students were identified as being "at-risk" due to severe economic disadvantage and substantial academic underachievement. Research conducted at our Laboratory focused on providing empirical support for various aspects of Crocker and Major's (1989) theoretical position regarding self-protective mechanisms of a stigmatized group.

Study 1

Crocker and Major (1989) noted that African-Americans consistently score low on self-concept when the scale is a measure of racial self-esteem, but high when the focus is on measuring global self-esteem. The support for the latter contention on global self-esteem was provided by the dated review of Porter and Washington (1979). The purpose of Study 1 was to update that finding with regard to global self-esteem.

The Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers & Harris, 1964), which is widely used in measuring adolescent self-concept, was administered to 196 African-Americans. Cronbach alpha, a measure of internal consistency, for the Piers-Harris total scores for this sample was .83. The mean scores for the sample and the Piers-Harris norms are presented in Table 1. One-mean t tests, at the .01 alpha level, were conducted, with the results also tabled below. (The .01 alpha level was selected to minimize a trivial difference being statistically significant solely due to the large sample size.)

Scores for the sample were significantly higher than the norms for the total self-concept score and for all six self-concept subscales. These results are consistent with the review of Porter and Washington (1979), update their finding, and illustrate that despite being at-risk and under-achieving, these African-American students had strong global self-concepts. Further, these results extend the understanding of global self-esteem to include specific subscales of self-concept.

Study 2

Crocker and Major (1989) pointed out that members of stigmatized groups have low self-esteem. There is some evidence to the contrary (e.g., Study 1 above; Adam, 1978), however, that members of these groups have high self-esteem. Where high self-esteem is in evidence, it may be due to stigmatized individuals experiencing negative feedback and attributing it to prejudice against their group, rather than due to a valid personal inadequacy (Crocker & Major, 1989). The availability of the prejudicial perspective may promote an overuse of a self-protective externalizing mechanism (Goffman, 1963), such as locus of control (e.g., Rotter, 1990; Strickland, 1989). This, in turn, may lead to a personality style of externalization as a method by which self-esteem is protected.

The Nowicki-Strickland Scale (1973), a measure of internal-external locus of control, was administered to 110 adolescent African-Americans. This scale investigates respondents' beliefs about causality and the control of events in their lives. Split-halves reliability for the sample, corrected by the equal length Spearman-Brown formula, was .68. The same reliability method and result was found by Nowicki and Strickland (1973). As they noted, the relatively low reliability is attributed to the items being additive and not directly comparable, as well as the differing degrees of difficulty among the items. Cronbach alpha, which is sensitive to heterogeneity of the dependent variable, but not item difficulty, was .73 for the sample. Nowicki and Strickland (1973) also obtained test-retest estimates ranging from .63 to .71, with the higher estimates for older students.

The mean for the Nowicki and Strickland (1973) total score for 7th and 8th grade boys and girls that participated in their study was 13.73. The mean for the current sample was 15.23. A one-mean t test conducted at the .01 alpha level yielded a significant t of 3.69, d.f. = 109, $p = .00$.

In as much as higher scores on this instrument are indicative of externality, the findings show that the African-American youngsters in this sample were more external in their beliefs about events which control their lives than the comparison group of Nowicki and Strickland (1973). These findings support Crocker and Major's hypothesis that individuals belonging to a stigmatized group use externalization as a self-protective mechanism.

Study 3

In order to better understand the use of externalization as a self-protective mechanism by youngsters in our sample (see Study 2), Study 3 examines causal attributions for positive and negative life events. Based upon the reformulated learned helplessness model (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978), the Attributional Style Questionnaire was developed by Peterson, Semmel, Baeyer, Abramson, Metalsky, and Seligman (1982).

The Attributional Style Questionnaire purports to measure attributional styles along the following dimensions: internal - external, stable - unstable, and global - specific. This questionnaire can be scored to yield 14 additional subscales.

The purpose of Study 3 was to (a) report preliminary psychometric information regarding the use of this instrument (because we have not seen the use of this instrument with a sample such as ours), (b) provide analyses by gender, and (c) describe the causal attributions of the sample.

In Table 2, each subscale computed from the 48 item Questionnaire is followed by the number of items per subscale, its Cronbach Alpha, and the Spearman - Brown prediction of internal consistency based on increasing each subscale to 48 items.

In Table 3, descriptive data and a series of *t* tests performed at the .01 alpha level on the three dimensions by gender are reported. The mean scores for each of the subscales are similar to the types of scores reported by other studies using this instrument (e.g., Peterson et al., 1982). Results for the *t* test showed the following: internal, $t = -1.98$, d.f. = 139, $p = .049$; stable, $t = -.73$, d.f. = 139, $p = .469$; global, $t = .72$, d.f. = 134, $p = .472$. These findings indicate there were no significant differences between boys and girls in this sample, and thus, further analyses were conducted without regard to gender.

Because the Attributional Style Questionnaire elicits responses to both positive and negative life events, it was scored to yield the two subscales of composite positive attributional style and composite negative attributional style. As a further refinement of these two subscales, they were divided with regard to the three dimensions (i.e., internal, stable, global), yielding six additional subscales: (a) internal composite positive, (b) internal composite negative, (c) stable composite positive, (d) stable composite negative, (e) global composite positive, and (f) global composite negative.

In order to investigate if youngsters in the sample used different attributional styles about positive and negative life events, analyses were conducted on these subscales. A series of independent samples *t* tests conducted at the .01 alpha level yielded the following: Composite Positive vs Composite Negative, $t = 13.21$, d.f. = 142, $p = .000$; Internal Positive vs Internal Negative, $t = 11.89$, d.f. = 147, $p = .000$; Stable Positive vs Stable Negative, $t = 9.49$, d.f. = 147, $p = .000$; Global Positive vs Global Negative, $t = 8.18$, d.f. = 142, $p = .000$. For all four comparisons, the means in response to positive life events were higher than the means in response to negative life events.

The results of Study 3 show that attributional style in response to positive events is significantly different than for styles in response to negative events. The youngsters in this sample viewed the causes of positive events as being significantly more internal, stable, and global than were the causes of negative events. This can be interpreted as a healthy adjustment to being a member of a stigmatized group, in as much as positive events were considered to be within the internal control of the individual, as well as being stable and global. Negative events were seen as resulting from events external to the individual. Further, these negative events were less stable and less global than for positive events.

Summary

The three studies reported here lend empirical support to the theoretical position of Crocker and Major (1989) on the self-protective properties of stigma. They show (a) the global self concept of these youngsters was significantly higher than reported norms, (b) they were more external in their beliefs about events which control their lives than reported norms, and (c) they view themselves as having more influence over positive life events than negative life events.

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TABLE 1

Comparison of Sample Means to Piers-Harris Norms

	Subscale						
	Behavior	Intellectual & School Status	Physical Appearance & Attributes	Anxiety	Popularity	Happiness & Satisfaction	Total
Norm	13.0	12.0	8.2	9.3	8.8	7.6	53.0
Sample	13.6	13.0	11.3	11.2	12.4	9.8	61.7
t	2.57	3.73	16.68	5.79	59.09	16.53	8.64
d.f.	162	161	159	129	169	173	126
p	.01	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00

Table 2. Attributional Style Questionnaire

Subscale	Items	Cronbach Alpha	Spearman-Brown
Internal - External	12	.42	.74
Stable - Unstable	12	.45	.77
Global - Specific	12	.59	.85
Composite Positive	18	.67	.84
Composite Negative	18	.62	.81
Internal Positive	6	.36	.82
Internal Negative	6	.51	.89
Stable Positive	6	.48	.88
Stable Negative	6	.55	.91
Global Positive	6	.63	.93
Global Negative	6	.49	.88
Hopefulness	12	.65	.88
Hopelessness	12	.63	.87
Achievement Positive	9	.53	.86
Achievement Negative	9	.41	.79
Affiliation Positive	9	.52	.85
Affiliation Negative	9	.43	.80

Table 3. Data For The Three Dimensions Of The Attribution Style Questionnaire

Dimension	Group	Mean	SD	n	t	d.f.	p
Internal - External	Boys	54.9	9.7	74	-1.98	139	.049
	Girls	57.9	8.5	67			
	Total	56.5	9.3	141			
Stable - Unstable	Boys	52.3	8.6	74	- .73	139	.469
	Girls	53.5	10.3	67			
	Total	52.9	9.2	141			
Global - Specific	Boys	49.6	10.9	70	.72	134	.472
	Girls	48.2	10.6	66			
	Total	48.8	10.7	136			